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THE SUPERMAN IN AMERICA

The Superman in America

By

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THE SUPERMAN IN AMERICA

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To
H. L. MENCKEN
THE FABRE OF THE AMERICAN INSECT

THE SUPERMAN IN AMERICA



NIETZSCHE's Superman is the man that stands above the herd, the man of original self-values, the individual whose will-to-power and will-to-grandeur is supra-group, supra-normal. In a word, Genius. In genius, and nowhere else, shall we find Superman, for genius is will-to-power and will-to-grandeur at its highest conceivable Earth-evolution.

The cult of Superman in America began long before Nietzsche first gave poetic and philosophic vitality to a biological and psychological law as old as the race: the superior man is a law unto himself. Three men were born in America during the first twenty years of the nineteenth century who preached Superman and who lived their philosophies in their three various ways. They were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. Curiously, too, these three protagonists of Superman in the Western world were all Puritans ("Walt Whitman a Puritan!"—

I hear. Yes. Walt was in early life a prohibitionist, which many of the Puritan fathers were not, and his "Children of Adam" was merely the Puritan sex-cat out of the bag).

✓ The New England Puritans were retro-men, group-supermen. They have about them the glamour of transvaluers of all natural and individual values. They were inhuman, fanatics, Spartans. They tried to "overcome themselves," "surpass themselves." Nietzsche was himself, personally, a Protestant Puritan, and there are many things in his teachings that resemble the hard, grim, stern, self-conquering lives of the Puritans. Moral strength, not pleasure, was their spiritual slogan. Their "superior man" was the godly man. Their "beyond-man" was a Theocrat. For Nietzsche's "Anti-Christ" substitute Anti-Pan. The Puritans despised culture, beauty, liberty. They opposed unity to variety. They cultivated a Self which was always merged with a brutal, sadistic, personal God.

Emerson was not so much a revolt against his Puritan ancestry as a mental sublimation of this group egoism into a doctrine of personal egoism. He took the Puritan doctrine of a militant The-

ocracy and made of it a doctrine of militant Egoarchy. The Puritans had made the State, or the group, the pivot of all ethical values. Emerson transferred it to the individual. He substituted variety for unity. For a static God he substituted a plastic and malleable Oversoul. In "Self-Reliance" he taught the doctrine of the theocratic Anarch. It is the American Zarathustra. He pitted the individual against the State and Society. He took the Divine Ordinances of the Puritans off of the statute books and put them within himself. He dynamited his ancestral house, and when the smoke had cleared away he was seen standing on the ruins, smiling, unperturbed, announcing himself—or, rather, Self. He was still a Puritan, but a Puritan who had eaten up Puritanism. He was the first man to preach Superman in America, and his "Self-Reliance" is the most tremendous challenge of the individual Dæmon to State and Society ever penned if we except Max Stirner's *The Ego and His Own*. ✓

The doctrine of Transcendentalism, of which Emerson was the chief expounder and Thoreau and Whitman the chief living representatives, was the American manifestation of European Roman-

ticism. The very word transcendentalism contains all the connotations of the word superman, which came later. It was pantheistic, egoistic, anti-social, intuitional, amoral. It was the one great anti-democratic movement in America. Out of the dung-heaps of equality this flower of inequality, individual rebellion and cultural aristocracy reared its head. But there was too much dung for the life of the flower.

Henry David Thoreau was a born rebel. He was an American superman sprung fully armed from the narrow and unimaginative brow of New England Puritanism. He has no "Self-Reliance," no *Zarathustra*, no "Song of Myself." He incarnated all three of these at his birth. At twenty-two he wrote: "The social condition of genius is the same in all ages." Again, "Not by constraint or severity shall you have access to true wisdom, but by abandonment and childlike mirthfulness. If you would know aught, be gay before it." (The soul of *Zarathustra* in America before Nietzsche was born!) Again, "For an impenetrable shield, stand inside yourself." Again, "I have a deep sympathy with war—it so apes the gait and bearing of the soul." Again, "None are travelling

one road so far as myself." These aphorisms he evolved from his conduct, not the conduct from the aphorisms.

Thoreau's egoism was acid, brutal. He was a mystic, and each day he saluted himself as the Son of God, rendering everything unto God (who was the immanent, internal, eternal Thoreau) and as little as possible unto Caesar. In fact, he once told the latter flatly to go to hell by refusing to pay his taxes, for which he served a day in jail. He floated in the Narcissan ecstasy of all mystics, egoists and outsiders. "May I love and revere myself above all the gods that men have ever invented. May I never let the vestal fire go out in my recess." He was the enemy of everything that was external to him except Nature herself. He bore his "head through atmospheres and over heights unknown to my feet." Merely by withdrawing, by turning his back, he antagonized. He has been called "a loafer," a "boor," a "bum." Like Socrates, Jesus, and Whitman, he shirked life in order to live. "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too!" together with all the politics and blather of the world, was to him so much garbage. "The editors of newspapers, the popular clergy, politi-

cians and orators of the day and office-holders . . . are only the various ingredients of the froth which ever floats on the surface of society."

It is probable that Nietzsche never heard of Walt Whitman. Nietzsche's messianic instinct dogmatically excluded all rivals except Goethe, the early Wagner, and Schopenhauer. If he had read Whitman he would most probably have disapproved of him on the ground of his mysticism and his glorification of democracy—in spite of the fact that Whitman's democracy and his dream that America would evolve "athletic" men and women, with its tremendous affirmation of life-values, are implicit in the Nietzschean philosophy.

On the other hand, it is almost certain that Whitman never heard of Nietzsche. But I cannot help feeling that Old Walt comes nearer to the dream of Nietzsche's Superman made real than any other person that has yet existed. There are in his *Leaves of Grass* the Dionysian ecstasy, the Homeric consciousness, the apotheosis of pioneers, the deification of the senses, the dithyrambic shout of Pan, the fearlessness of Death, the radiant Yes before Fatality, the proclamation of the Ego, the spontaneous Me, the thunderous *Evohé!* before,

during, and after the sex-act; the dancing thought, the doctrine of the Eternal Return, the will-to-power and the will-to-grandeur.

Walt Whitman, simple, concrete, primitive, barbaric, audaciously and "obscenely" real, plopped down among Americans like a carousing Gargantua in a convention of Methodists. He immediately reversed all known values by innocently asking America to look at his body. His terrific "Ecce Homo, Camden, N. J., U. S. A.," shook the Capitol at Washington. His blasphemic subjectivity and rhymeless fanfaring of his soul sent Longfellow to his grave. Grangousier Emerson bit his lip and turned away at the sight of the Gargantua that had sprung from his loins. But Walt Whitman, superman and such a "democrat" as neither Jefferson nor Lincoln had ever dreamed of in their platitudinous souls, stroked his beard and said, "Here I am. What are you going to do with me?"

Whitman died in 1892. Four years before that date Nietzsche's brain had passed into the shadow that always hovers around the mind of every genius, although he did not actually die until 1900. Nietzsche at the time of his death was unknown in

America except to students of German philosophy and the word superman was unknown.

The unknown implications of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* have not been guessed by the world. Mark Twain himself has never been taken seriously as a critic of life. He had all the elements in him of a Yankee superman, a satiric transvaluer of all American and even world values. The tragedy of the slow strangling of a great individual in the hempen folds of tradition, family, and his own cowardice can be read in that incomparable book by Van Wyck Brooks, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, a great indictment of a whole country and a whole social system.

Huckleberry Finn was a super-boy, an untamed, uncouth, off-on-his-own-hook kid, and bore a striking resemblance to an American that has now passed away. Huck was divinely devoid of what Nietzsche has called almost contemptuously "the historical sense." He created his own world of his own spontaneous self. He violated conventions with joy. He was a vagabond, creating his own values as he went along Walt Whitman's Open Road. He was Mark Twain's secret self. But Mark wisely did not allow Huck to grow up. He

knew what his super-boy would have become by looking in a mirror. So this little American Gargantua, this superman in the egg, was duly strangled to death at adolescence, which is the American-all-too-American way.

In 1908, H. L. Mencken published his *Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*. In 1909, James Huneker published his *Egoists: a Book of Supermen*, containing three essays on Nietzsche: "The Will to Suffer," "Nietzsche's Apostasy," and "Antichrist." A few years before this Nietzsche had come to America diluted in the grin of George Bernard Shaw's brilliant *Man and Superman* and "The Revolutionist's Handbook." Translations of Nietzsche's works began to appear in English shortly after his death. So by 1910 the word superman was firmly on its feet in America. The word Nietzsche, however, still meant nothing over here. In the first place, no one could pronounce it, and, secondly, there was a vague idea that he had gone insane after trying to blow up the Vatican or had died of indigestion while dining on stewed infants à la Baudelaire. Huneker, aside from the three above-mentioned essays, used the word Nietzsche incessantly in his articles in the news-

papers and magazines. He had been tremendously influenced by the great poet and thinker. He had before that, early in life, been influenced by Walt Whitman by personal contact. The egotism of the two men inflamed him, the most inflammable of men.

But Huneker, as a matter of fact, needed no Whitman or Nietzsche. He was a born Romantic, a born egoist, a born superman of culture, a furious, dynamic, incandescent individual. Edgar Saltus was his partner in the enterprise of dethroning the American philistine. Saltus was the aristocrat of the movement. Huneker was the democrat. Saltus was a superman of the study. Huneker was a superman of the streets. Saltus was for Schopenhauer, von Hartmann, and the nihilistic passivity of Leconte de Lisle. Huneker was for Whitman, Nietzsche, and the dynamic energy of Victor Hugo. The Apollonian and the Dionysian—contemplation and ecstasy—incarnate simultaneously in American letters in the twentieth century! It was these two men who announced Europe and its lordly transvaluers of values to America, the return of two Columbuses from the continent of Europe after four hundred years

laden with loot. They have both affected profoundly our literature and cultural points of view.

Henry Louis Mencken, savage, two-fisted, a materialist and atheist in the grand old use of those words, an iconoclast, a dissociator, a verbal thug; a man who sometimes confuses artistocracy with quality, a fearless individualist, a unicellular propagandist for Ethical Might, a brawler and slugger in the House of Smug; a social satirist of the first magnitude, with a pen dipped in the stink-pots of Swift and Voltaire; a reformer who laughs at reform, a Yankee who riddles Yankees, a founder of a school who spits on all schools; a superman of the desk, a Superior Man in shirt-sleeves, a laboratory brain superposed on a Falstaff—H. L. Mencken has in twenty years exerted a greater liberalizing influence on American public life and the youth of the country than any other man of that period.

Mencken brings not peace, but a poignard. He has to be narrow to do his job. He has the furious one-sidedness of Nietzsche. The core of his strength is moral indignation. His brutal laughter camouflages his tears. He aims at transvaluing all current American values. Titanic task!—but

✓

no man at the present writing has made the walls of Jericho so tremble. May they never fall down!—for then Mencken would be without a reason for being. He is a great American because he is the only American that ever looked on American life as a sport. His tongue is in his cheek at half he writes. So was God's, apparently, when he created the world. He goes about as far as an American can go without feeling a Methodist bread-knife in his guts. But he is a good citizen, votes the regular ticket when it is wet and is a member in good standing of the New Orleans Fire Department. Personally, he is as harmless and as charming as Nietzsche himself.

When Superman became Superwoman in America: Isadora Duncan. In her amazing book, *My Life*, a female *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, she says her dancing teachers were Walt Whitman and Friedrich Nietzsche. The foreword to her book is a quotation from Nietzsche. Her life is the record of the greatest triumph of female will and vision over matter and opposition that I know of. Here was an American who filled the Nietzschean formula of Superman in almost all details—and a woman, a puritan, an American! What would

Nietzsche have said to that, he who said of woman, Take a lash with you when you go to her?

Isadora Duncan was, as I have said, a Superwoman to the Nietzschean cut. She danced over life, she underwent all agonies; she triumphed over all her tragedies; she was pagan, Greek, amoral; by acts of audacity and fortitude that were almost Promethean she transvalued all the values with which heredity and environment had inoculated her; she kept vision and self-realization high above starvation and defeat; she followed her Dæmon, though it lead her to hell; her life was a perpetual overcoming and beyondness; she battered at all social standards and nailed I Will! and Thou be Damned! on her doorposts; she found the laws of all rhythms within herself; she made an almost superhuman effort to restore the culture of Greece and superpose it on Christianity—so divinely ludicrous was this effort that the gods laughed at her and crowned her Doña Quixota; she was naïve, amoral, a breath of that New Day and Old Innocence that Nietzsche glorified; she was mother, sweetheart, sister, daughter, Madonna-Isolde-Dionysia all in one: a Superwoman of San Francisco, one of the greatest, most

fearless women in all history, an intercalated spirit of dynamic grandeur in soulless, standardized America.

She was the Woman of Walt Whitman—she made the soul and body one. She was the Superman of Nietzsche—a bridge to the Beyond. Isadora danced to the tragi-comic rhythms of the ironic gods. Born a puritan of puritans, she became a living satire on puritanism; a woman that divinized motherhood, her eyes had to behold her children's little bodies battered to death; seeking to destroy the Age of Machinery, she, like her children, was destroyed by machinery. Dare to live as Isadora Duncan lived, and you are a Superman—or Superwoman.

A vastly Superior Man of our time in America was Ambrose Bierce. I do not know whether he ever had read Nietzsche. If he had, he would probably have satirized him, for few escaped that brain sewn with dragons' teeth, the veins and blood-vessels of which were squirming scorpions and tarantulas. It, however, would have made no difference to Bierce whether Nietzsche had ever existed or not. His masters were Juvenal, Victor Hugo of *Les Châtiments*, and Swift. I use the

word "masters" apologetically. Bierce was an original—in America a monstrosity, like Poe of the Tales. In America, ironic invective, the brutal imagination, moral indignation that wears the face of hate and an unswerving and joyful adherence to the art of making enemies are anathema—in a country whose national anthem is O Be Joyful! Thumbs down on Bierce, then! He was inhuman—all-too-inhuman. Thou shalt not commit irony!

Bierce was one of our Supermen. He had values of his own and roved the cold heavens of Apperception with a pitiless eye. His style was sheer, stark, bare, corrosive. A satanic gayety pervaded it. He was a Dionysian Boreas. There are polar blasts in all his pages, in the most trivial. He understood friendship in the manner of an "antique Roman." Like Swift, he was ashamed to be human. Which means that at bottom he was tender, human and generous—such is the paradox of these perverse souls. His murderous irony was a veil that covered the incurable melancholy of a being born in the wrong æon. He died with a sneer at mankind—and at himself, no doubt.

*aphorism
2.2.*

The influence of the philosophy of Nietzsche in American creative literature at the present moment

is profoundly in evidence in our three greatest imaginative writers — Robinson Jeffers, James Branch Cabell, and Eugene O'Neill.

Robinson Jeffers is the poet of Crazy Beauty. He is in the stream of the Dreadful Beauty—that thin stream on the borderland of our consciousness on the hither side of which we remain men, on the yon side of which there walk the tall and Beauty-ravished gods and the sublime madmen. Jeffers is of the spit and spawn of Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Chopin, Blake, Coleridge, De Quincey, Baudelaire, Poe, Dostoievsky, D'Annunzio, Dante, Wagner, and Nietzsche. I do not use these names haphazard in seeking to decompose into its elements the semen that conceived the most original and most daringly super and hyper of all American writers. For I find in him the tragic terror of Aeschylus, the supreme artistic aloofness and impersonality of Shakespeare, the divine melancholy and remote spiritual pathos of Chopin, the imaginative insanity of Blake, the lurid grandeur of Coleridge, the hallucinant chiaroscuro of De Quincey, the satanic joy in the hideous of Baudelaire, the psycho-analytical topsy-turvyism of Dostoievsky, the beautiful morbidity of D'An-

nunzio, the horror-love of Dante, the eeriness and incestuous motives of Wagner, and, above all and beyond all, the defiant and aureoled wickedness of Nietzsche's Antichrist and Superman.

Jeffers annuls all moral values. In four of his great tragic poems he constructs a world where Instinct, Desire, Unreason, and the Blond Beast are supreme. In the fifth, "The Coast Range Christ," he satirizes Christianity unmercifully. He is a man obsessed with the dream of a race that will wrench itself free of all hitherto accepted standards. He begins where Nietzsche left off. He has dramatized in concrete creations the abstractions and mystical dare-deviltry of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*.

All of Jeffers' heroes and heroines are arch-criminals. Tamar is impenitent incest and lust. The Rev. Dr. Barclay, in *The Women at Point Sur*, is the self-proclaimed incarnation of God, to whom all things are permitted, the least of which is the seduction of his own daughter. His dream is the regeneration of the race through crime and unrestrained egomania. You shall be saved through Cain, not Christ. California, the Heroine of *Roan Stallion*, is in love with a horse, a stallion.

In her search for the ultimate male principle she finds it only in the animal world, this super-Mesalina. In "The Tower Beyond Tragedy" Electra and Orestes, brother and sister, are lovers, as Tamar and her brother were ("We must keep sin pure or it will poison us," says Tamar, a profound paradox, greater than any of Nietzsche's). David Carrow, in "The Coast-Range Christ," slacks on war-registration day in the name of "the Prince of Peace," hurls a woman from him who tries to seduce him as though he had met the Beast of the Apocalypse, and is shot to death in a running fight as he sees coming to greet him from a mountain top the Superman of Galilee. Robinson Jeffers is the most portentous figure, either artistically or personally, of the post-Nietzschean literary world.

James Branch Cabell, romantic ironist, the creator of Jurgin, Dom Manuel, Horvendile, and an immense gallery of fantastic knights, priests, strumpets and other super-lords of life, has been to what extent I know not a reader of Nietzsche. But his books—those gorgeous pages spun of gold and gray threads pilfered from the bobbins of the Norns—are a perfect Asgard of Supermen and Superwomen, men and women who have fore-

shortened the unborn centuries of evolution with the magic shears of the imagination. They live the super-life in the super-land of Poictesme, which is the end of every poet's desire.

Cabell has out of his horror of Reality recreated Myth in all its ironic and effulgent beauty in the full day of matter-cumbered America, where the Delphic Oracle thunders its decrees from a check-book. The seriousness of Zarathustra dissolves in the Cabellian noiseless laughter and the values of humanity are translated into the mockery of a vast fairy-tale wrought with a pen.

Like Bierce and Jeffers, he is a supreme critic of stupidity, an American Superman.

Eugene O'Neill has always been an "outsider." He was a born Nay-sayer who has evolved into the mighty Yea of his Lazarus, for every Nay contains the seed of a Yea and every Yea presupposes a Nay. It is the immanent paradox of interlocking opposites. There are no contradictions in life—there are only opposites. Dashing his brain and his body against an inimical environment, O'Neill gave birth to vast creational powers. Life had twisted his neck. He studied her twist-tricks and he has now begun to twist the neck of Life.

O'Neill's early plays are epics of the dust. They depict humans who have tried to transcend fatality and failed. In *The Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and *Anna Christie*, and even in *Strange Interlude*, are the records of the ego's war against Thou shalt not! All of O'Neill's central characters in his plays are glimpses into the soul of O'Neill himself. I doubt whether there was ever a time in O'Neill's life when he wasn't a revolutionist, not a programme revolutionist like Jack London and Bernard Shaw, but a revolutionist that would make the individual the unit of social values, that would dethrone Church, State, family and Christian morality and put them where they belong, in the Museum of Necessary Evils.

A reading of *Lazarus Laughed* discloses the tremendous effect that the *Zarathustra* of Nietzsche has had on O'Neill. This book has been with him for years. He found in *Zarathustra* a valid reason for life, its tragedies, its failures, its struggles. He found in it the laughter of the Adventure, the valid linking of Man with eternal processes. Lazarus is O'Neill himself. Coming out of the grave at the call of a Master Will, O'Neill through

the mouth of his Lazarus utters a tremendous Yea to Life and reveals that what he heard in the "grave" was the oceanic laughter of God. We live and move and have our being in its folds. But Lazarus, as well as O'Neill, knows that this hypostatic Laughter is not for the little men of Earth—that is, not yet—as Nietzsche knew that his Zarathustra still lay asleep in the uncreate womb of a messianic Mary.

Jurgen, the Rev. Dr. Barclay, and Lazarus are three types of Superman created in America by three great literary artists within a period of ten years. All three writers are native-born, two of them—Cabell and Jeffers—of American stock. Their Supermen bear unmistakable American characteristics. Jurgen has the naïve curiosity, the *insouciance*, the runaway-from-home, the I-wonder-what's-over-there of the American. The Rev. Dr. Barclay has the sadistic, evangelical, theatrical characteristics of the American. Lazarus is the eternal optimism in the face of no-matter-what of the American soul. There is nothing of the Old World's Hamlets, Don Quixotes, or Fausts about them. Along certain lines, their ancestry could be traced directly back to Jonathan Edwards.

America is not only a caricature of herself, but she caricatures whatever is really great. I speak, of course, of post-Spanish-War America, which is modern America. America is a caricature of her own Constitution. She is a caricature of the spirit of the Declaration. Her politicians are caricatures of statesmen. Her culture is a caricature of the word culture. Her gods are caricatures of God. Her oppressive laws are a caricature of the "land of the free" of her national anthem. Her music is a caricature of music. Her plutocratic democracy is a caricature of Jeffersonian democracy. Her lawlessness is a caricature of her multitudinous laws. Her financial grip on the countries of Europe is a caricature of Wilson's "we ask nothing in return." And so forth *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*.

✓ So we have had, too, a perfect caricature of Nietzsche's Superman. This was Theodore Roosevelt. He was a man of tremendous force and mediocre mind. He had a Blond Beast in him which he schooled to lay down with the democratic lamb—the better to eat you, my dear. He was born with a will-to-power in all its unscrupulous grandeur which he was compelled by law and by custom to drain off in a thousand futile directions.

He assumed the mask of cultured dilettanteism in default of an innate culture. The Dionysian *Evohé!* of Nietzsche he democratized into the doctrine of the Strenuous Life and the roar of the bull-moose. Dreaming of military grandeur and an Austerlitz, he became the hero of San Juan Hill. Secretly desirous of transvaluing some current values, he tried to revolutionize the spelling of a hundred words. Seeing in himself a Drake, a Stanley, a Marco Polo, he went forth and discovered the River of Doubt. Hoping to become the master of a cult, he urged the workingman to multiply Americans. He died of grief because he had to play second fiddle to Woodrow Wilson. Theodore Roosevelt was the Tartarin of Superman.

Woodrow Wilson was an approximation to Superman *à rebours*. He was born a mental, physical, and cultural aristocrat. But he discovered that the will-to-power in America, politically and ethically, lies in wearing the mask of democracy and concealing one's egomania behind the slogan, It is for the General Good! Woodrow Wilson secretly despised the people and all mass-values. He had an academic regard for the Constitution, which he

secretly desired to suspend or abolish in the name of the higher Woodrovian ethics, hatched in the cold and lonely eyries of his cerebral solitudes.

He had the will-to-grandeur toward the end in all its paranoiac splendor. By disciplined feats of auto-suggestion he sought to break the world to his will. He saw himself as President of a League of World Nations the Ethical Emperor of a planet, a beneficent tyrant of freedom. He adapted *The Prince* of Machiavelli to the times he lived in and the needs of his own egotism. He aureoled himself with a messianic light. The light turned out to be an explosive gas which detonated and killed him.

American mass-consciousness remains absolutely untouched by the doctrine of Superman. It is innately philistine, conservative, without vision, without imagination, without daring. Nothing has yet reached it from above. All its values come from below, from politics, business, machinery. Its Supermen are Ford, Rockefeller, Edison, Coolidge. It is good that this should be, for without the masses and its cash-down values the Superman could not be. There would be nothing to transcend, no shadow to show off his dazzling beauty.

Minerals & Graham of these days
criticism is a quite destructive method
if constructive

& if Hedy Lamarr was to give a
reading of Jeffers "The dead"

I'm sure she'd read it with
criticism of it would be the
only means of trying to show
up the criticism or later begin
of indifference after listening one
stayed in pants & to
be a failure

